

The 73rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3

Caterpillars, My Beloved Man's Female Body, Just Super: Once again on the role of identity politics at the Berlin film festival

Stefan Steinberg
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This is the third article on the 2023 Berlin International Film Festival, held February 16 to February 26. The first was posted on February 22 and the second on March 2.

The exploitation of this year's Berlin film festival (Berlinale) for the purposes of war propaganda has already been noted in an initial article dealing with the event's opening days. Another distinct but hardly new trend at the 73rd Berlinale was the festival leadership's preoccupation with gender and identity politics. On a number of occasions this tendency, which has been elevated into the mainstream of German politics, in particular by the Green Party, Left Party and a host of pseudo-left organisations, took unprecedented and, at times, frankly absurd forms.

The impetus was provided by the festival leadership itself prior to the start of the Berlinale, with the release of a 44-page document entitled "Gender Evaluation 2023." The document listed the selection of films and the gender of their respective film crews according to the categories female, male, non-binary, and no information available, comparing the various percentages to previous years. According to this document, the quality of the films on show at the festival is secondary to the issue of the gender or sexual orientation of those involved in making them. This is a means of establishing de facto gender quotas.

A preoccupation with identity (in the parlance of the festival and other such events, "diversity") issues, sex and race, was evident throughout.

Caterpillars (Les Chenilles) from France

One example of this obsession was reflected in the

official festival award for best short film to the 30-minute French film *Caterpillars (Les Chenilles)*, directed by Lebanese sisters Michelle and Noel Keserwany. *Caterpillars* is certainly a worthy candidate for the short film award. The problem is that upon reading the justification for the award, one has the impression the jury watched a different film.

The short film deals with the relationship between two women, one from Lebanon and another from Syria, forced to leave their countries of origin and move to France. Asma (Masa Zaher), from Syria, has already resided and worked in France for five years and helps new arrival Sarah (co-director Noel Keserwany) find her feet. The characters' plight reflects the situation confronting the two directors, who also left their homeland and family under pressure and were required to adapt rapidly to conditions in a new country.

At the heart of the film is the friendship that develops between two women who face the same working and exploitative conditions. Both are forced to perform slave-like work as waitresses. Another strand of the film recalls the situation of female workers employed in silk factories in the 19th century. The integration of women into the process of production, in fact, provides the basis for their emancipation, as they become an active part of the proletariat.

Caterpillars is an engaging film about the blossoming solidarity between the two main characters. Utilizing the obscure and convoluted language favoured by advocates of identity politics, however, the jury choose to misread the film entirely. It asserted that "this complex sensual film transforms the means of

woman's oppression into those of their liberation. When the third person becomes an 'I,' the women are no longer objects of exploitation, but have turned into subjects. ... An immediate friendship connects two women, in whose bodies the consequences of colonialization are inscribed."

How so? The two women have developed a friendship, but nothing has changed regarding their social status. At the end of the film, the two women are still working as waitresses and remain *objects* of exploitation. And why are "the consequences of colonisation" an exclusive problem for female workers?

The jury text says much more about the pretensions and prejudices of the jury than it does about the film.

My Beloved Man's Female Body

Testing the patience of the reader, another example—one of the festival's "Companion" fellowships awarded to highly regarded film projects went to Ukrainian director Anna Melikova for her draft of a movie entitled *My Beloved Man's Female Body*.

In its justification for the award, the festival jury noted that the context for the proposed film is the war in Ukraine. Its main subject is a woman transitioning to a man, who feels threatened by the call-up of young men to fight in the Ukrainian army. The award jury notes that the main character is not allowed to cross the national border, "because as a man he has to defend his country, even though his papers still identify him as a woman. His partner remains by his side and in turn has to redefine herself, as she is now read as heterosexual after his transition."

Declaring that it sees "great potential" in the project, the jury presumes to identify parallels between the sex change of a woman, the new sexual status of his/her partner and the war in the Ukraine! The jury statement concludes in surreal fashion: "The whole country, just like these two characters, is in transition, and when it's over, nothing will be the same as it was before." (!!)

Just Super

Finally, allegations of racism also arose at the festival after the so-called Anti-Racism Taskforce for European Film (Artef) contacted the festival organisers to raise concerns about the supposed "depictions of Blackface and animalisation of Black people" in the Norwegian animated children's film, *Just Super*. Responding to the accusations, the festival leadership cancelled the film's

international premiere only nine minutes before its screening was due to take place February 20.

The accusation that the film attempts to animalise black people is ludicrous. The children's film premiered in cinemas in Norway in September 2022, winning a large audience and picking up an audience award at the Tromsø International Film Festival last month. Anyone who watches the film's trailer will immediately recognise the baselessness of the allegations. Those objecting to the festival leadership's decision to pull the film's premiere included the Norwegian Film Institute (NFI), the producers of the film and anti-racism experts in Norway.

The NFI issued a statement declaring: "Artistic freedom and freedom of expression are under tremendous pressure in our time, and films should be screened unhindered at festivals if we are to have good discussions afterward. This concerns children's features as well." Following pressure from the above institutions and individuals, other scheduled showings of the film did take place at the Berlin festival.

This a short list of examples, which could easily be extended.

Against a backdrop of war in Europe, the ascendancy of the far right, social tensions at breaking point and the emergence of broad working class struggles, the festival revealed the sharp pressure exerted on artists and filmmakers to view and assess society exclusively through the blinkers of gender and race.

This pressure emanates in particular from former leftists and Greens who once advocated an inclusive multicultural society and minor reforms, but have now perverted such a perspective into its opposite—the cultivation of exclusivist cultural norms and the destruction of past reforms. The obsession with identity politics plays into the hands of the ruling elite and far-right forces, and serves to disorient workers and distract them from burning social issues.

Additional Berlinale articles will deal with some of the more interesting films on view at the festival.

To be continued



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